



Resistance among Saudi-Arabian Learners in Using English Language

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Abstract

This paper outlines and examines the role of English language learning in Saudi Arabian context. Through an extensive literature review of pertinent articles and research papers, the positive correlation between English language learning and the intrinsic motivation for language learners is identified. The main issues pertaining to English language acquisition among Saudi Arabian learners is analysed and the findings of relevant studies based on students and English language learners belonging to foreign countries are interpreted in the Saudi Arabian context. The research findings are then discussed in detail to develop key inferences in social and academic settings in Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis foreign countries such as the Philippines, Hungary and Taiwan. The results indicate the need for social and cultural acceptance of English language in Saudi Arabia; along with a re-evaluation of the existing academic system and curricula in order to make it more conducive for making learning English language more useful and pertinent in Saudi Arabia. The paper then draws relevant comparisons between English language teaching and learning strategies in Saudi Arabia and other foreign countries, in order to identify a viable way forward that would facilitate making acquisition of English language successful among future Saudi Arabian learners.



Keywords: Saudi Arabia, L2 acquisition, English learners, motivation, learning, teaching, globalization.

Introduction

English has become the official world language with a rapidly globalising world making it the ‘lingua franca’ of the world (Lan, Sung and Chan (2007) and more and more people related to fields of academics, commerce and technology are using it extensively. Nerad (2010) iterates that globalisation has affected many different regions and populations, adding to the burden of states to develop future generations of scholars and professionals that are capable of participating successfully in the national, as well as the international economy. According to Rajagopalam (2004), there are two times as many non-native speakers of English language in the world as compared to the native speakers of English. English has hence become a key language around the world. The importance of accepting and using the English language in non-English speaking countries is being realised more in all parts of the world, making it the most important foreign language in most countries (Liu and Chu, 2010). The need for individuals to be prepared for this increasingly challenging globally competitive stage is further enforced by Alshahrani and Al-Shehri (2012), who argue that students need to be prepared for the globalised world as a future generation of individuals who can compete in national as well as global markets.

Many countries around the world are turning towards using English as their official language. This is because more and more emphasis is being placed on accepting and using English as a formal means of communication across the world. Globalisation has played a key role in spreading and encouraging the use of the English language and need



for a proficiently English speaking population is being more realised than ever before. To the extent that in some countries, such as Korea, even in remote villages, governments are making far-reaching efforts to introduce English. For example, in Korea, the government has been able to successfully convert three native Korean villages into English-speaking villages by providing a highly conducive 'real English learning environment' (p.631, Liu and Chu, 2010). Evidence suggests that children from these English-speaking villages in Korea are using English words more frequently as compared to their local, native languages.

Saudi Arabia is an Arabic-speaking country, where recent efforts have been made by the government to embark various English language teaching and learning strategies in institutions across the nation. Since Arabic is the mother tongue of the country and at the same time is also the official language in offices and working environments, it is also the main language teachers' use in their teaching and instruction. According to Alshahrani and Al-Shehri (2012), it is very rare to find students or teachers using English language outside of the classroom environment in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabian government has also come to realise the dire need for having future Saudi Arabian generations that are well versed in the English language, so that they can be at par with their counterparts from other nations in the world. Over previous years, the Saudi Arabian government has launched an aggressive and nationwide scheme to encourage teachers for undertaking training in English language. This scheme allows Saudi Arabian teachers and students to obtain in acclaimed universities in native English-speaking countries and return to Saudi Arabia with enhanced skills in English



language. In 2007-2008, about five thousand young Saudi Arabian students were offered fully funded scholarships for undergraduate and postgraduate study in foreign universities (Gallarotti 2013). This is a valuable move in light of evidence suggesting that there are approximately 85% of organisations in the world that communicate in English, and similarly, more than 90% of the material online is available in English language (Al-Jarf, 2008).

Purpose or problem:

English language is a widely used foreign language (Liu & Chu, 2010). Saudi Arabian government has been extensively providing platform and opportunities for local Saudi Arabian students to study abroad in foreign, well-established universities. However, there appears to be evident resistance among Saudi Arabian learners to use English language in their day-to-day lives (Alshahrani and Al-Shehri, 2012). Saudi Arabian students continue to use Arabic as their preferred and/or chosen language of communication socially and personally, whether it be verbal, written, or through social media platforms.

This paper will strive to determine why intrinsic motivation for acquiring and using English Language continues to be persistently low among Saudi Arabian learners, particularly in the local school and college environments in the country. This is striking especially because there are large amounts of opportunities being provided and efforts are being put in by the Saudi Arabian government to support the acquisition and use of English language in secondary and higher academic institutions of the country.

Design/method/approach



This research paper will rely on extensive review of existing literature on acquiring English language among learners from non-English speaking countries, including Taiwan, Korea and Saudi Arabia. The conclusions drawn from these papers and reports will then be interpreted in the Saudi Arabian context, and connections to local Saudi Arabian cultural, religious and way of life will be inferred. Being a teacher in Saudi Arabia, I will also rely on my peer teachers in Saudi Arabian institutions for their feedback and perspective on possible causes that attribute to low willingness or motivation for local Saudi Arabian learners in learning and using English language. In addition to their feedback and thoughts, I will also use my experience of secondary school teaching and apply my findings to the results as well. This will allow me to draw key inferences from existing teachers who face the challenge of unmotivated students in their classes, and will assess the measures/strategies they use to attain success. It will also allow me to present key findings that could be used to nurture positive attitudes and greater motivation among young Saudi Arabian learners for future.

Literature Review

The social aspect of learning a second language is crucial to an individual's 'willingness to communicate' in that language (Dörnyei, 2003, p.12; Gardner, 2007). A clear relationship exists between language, culture and discourse, in light of the cultural and political boundaries that are prevalent, together with the attitude of native-speakers in the classroom environment and the extent of 'ownership of the language' that individuals possess (Holliday, 2005). Olivia (2008, in Lucas et al., 2010) also highlights the role of social environment towards motivating secondary school learners for using their English language skills. Likewise, the main 'enemy', according to Holliday (2005), is the



frequently held belief in many cultures and countries, that English-speaking teachers represent a Western culture and English language, together with the teaching methods of English language, both originate from it (p.6). This viewpoint is further validated by Haq and Smadi (1996), who argue that there is fear that encompasses a majority of local Saudi Arabian people: of associating westernisation with the acquisition and use of the English language. English is an integral part of the 'western culture' and Saudi Arabians are concerned about losing their identity and Islamic culture with westernisation that may come about with English language.

The impact of globalisation on higher education is also being greatly realised across the globe, as it is seen to be modifying economies and cultures (Margenson and Wende, 2007). There is a strong sense of urgency being felt by nations for a global higher education, which will bring with it more opportunities for global exchange of innovations and alliances in international markets (Margenson and Wende, 2007). Nerad (2010) further strengthens the need for internationalisation of education, which undoubtedly requires English to become a common language for communication in the international arena. Similarly, Barr et al., (2008) highlight the increase in global integration and international mobility that has come about over the past decade, and in their Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians, they argue the importance of inculcating the 'global citizenship' among individuals. This, they suggest, will enable individuals to appreciate social, cultural and religious diversity. They further argue the importance education curriculum plays on developing this sense of global citizenship and considering the requirements from individuals that they feel is necessary, acquisition of the English language becomes an imperative component of these skills-set.



Saudi Arabian teachers and students are suffering from a host of limitations that are negatively impacting the learning of English language in secondary school learners. Al-Hazmi (2003) lays insight on specific issues and challenges those Saudi Arabian teachers and learners are experiencing towards learning and using the English language. He finds that in particular, the preparation programs for teachers are 'non-systematic and inadequate'. This strongly points towards the problems that are present in teachers' education and training. Dörnyei (2003) also reiterates the importance of teacher's skills in language acquisition of school learners, as he finds that language teachers tend to be more interested in how to motivate students instead of understanding what motivation is first. This is particularly relevant to their classroom environment and settings, which play a significant role in building or impeding their students' motivation levels towards attaining a new language. Dörnyei (2003) suggests that strategies should be developed to enhance teachers' motivation as it bears great influence on the success of student's learning and motivation.

Alshahrani & Al-Shehri (2012) provide an evaluation of the local Saudi Arabian education system, and shed light on the various programs the government has relied on in order to encourage acceptance of English in the country. In their finding, they state that there are extremely limited opportunities available for Saudi Arabian students to practice their English language skills, especially because there is such a limited presence of English language in the country. Most commercials and billboards in Saudi Arabia advertise in the local Arabic language, and English in media is very restricted. The notion that English represents westernisation of their culture bears a strong influence in



commercial activities. The amount of exposure English language learners have to English outside of their classrooms is limited, and therefore an opportunity to practice their English is also minimal outside school environment. Most activities and communications are in Arabic, and owing to the formal relationship between teachers and students which is strengthened by local culture and values, a great deal of care is taken to ensure respect and courtesy are maintained in all communications. This further adds to minimal communication in English as learners expression in speech are hindered, as students are apprehensive to say something that may lessen the teacher or elder person's respect inadvertently. However, Alshahrani and Al-Shehri (2012) further suggest that the role of E-learning has facilitated the use of English in other countries, and by using them in Saudi Arabia can especially be of value, as students will be able to put forward their queries and questions to their teachers through an electronic mail or online platforms, rather than in person, face-to-face with their teachers. This creates more prospects to allow more space and encouragement to the students to use English in their communications.

Using ubiquitous games to promote English language learning has been emphasised by Liu and Chu (2010). They demonstrate that in places where there is a lack of opportunity and platforms for students to practice their English skills, using a combination of games and technologies can help language learners to attain more confidence and greater learning outcomes. By using gaming methods to teach, motivation levels in students is higher as these students become more attentive and satisfied, and more eager to use their skills in English.



An in-depth research of freshman students in the Philippines by Lucas et al (2010) shed light on the role of intrinsic motivation among language learners in non-native English speaking countries. Their findings revealed that these students were highly intrinsically motivated to read and speak English, and even outside of the classroom, these Philippine students put in great efforts in communicating with their peer in English language. According to Lucas et al (2010), there is a high amount of exposure to English language in the Philippines, as the media, their social networking websites and forums, and the availability of extensive material for reading in English are existent. The presence of all these mediums provide Philippine students ample opportunity to practice and use their English language skills and encourage them further to achieve mastery in this language. According to their research, Philippine English learners prefer most to speak in English, followed by reading in English, and listening to English was ranked as their third most preferred skill of the language. In the words of Lucas et al (2010), the Filipino students were therefore at an advantage compared to ‘their Asian counterparts’ because of their early exposure to English language and their intrinsic motivation to speak and read in English (p.19).

Another pertinent study that demonstrates the relationship between learning English and motivation among students in Taiwan is one by Liao and Wong (2011), which sheds valuable insight on how English language acquisition can be made more meaningful among learners in non-English speaking countries. Like students in Saudi Arabia, Taiwanese students also experience hardship in writing in the English language, as state the task as being ‘arduous, challenging, frightening and unrewarding’, which undoubtedly reflects in their poor English writing skills (p.139, Liao & Wong, 2011). These Taiwanese



students were assigned the task of maintaining a dialogue journal, where students were instructed to write two paragraph entries that reflected on their thoughts, ideals and feelings as expressively and freely as they could. They were encouraged to write about those topics that they were interested in. Through this process, students gained awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses in their English writing skills, and also evaluated an increase in their intrinsic motivation towards acquiring and using English language. The anxiety associated with the fear of losing marks in assessment tasks in their classrooms was obliterated in the dialogue journal writing tasks, and the negative, anxiety-related attitudes were also vastly reduced among these students. Through this study, Liao and Wong (2011) conclude that students gained more confidence in their writing proficiency and wrote more quantitatively and qualitatively, but also very importantly, they found that these Taiwanese students witnessed overall growth in them as learners and as humans of their society. Writing dialogue journals provided these students with the platform to use their English writing skills in contexts that were more 'meaningful and authentic' to them (Orem, 2011, in Liao & Wong, 2011).

Results and Discussion

As Haq and Smadi (1996) state, the awareness to learn and enhance English communication skills is increasing among the young Saudi Arabian generation, but owing to the restricted social norms and resistance stemming from cultural and traditional beliefs, there is evident reluctance to embrace English language openly in the country. As with the struggles of Taiwanese students, Saudi Arabian secondary school learners also face greatest exposure to Arabic language, with virtually non-existent exposure to English in media or Internet. Social interaction platforms in Saudi Arabia use Arabic as their preferred language of communication, as well as television programs and telecasting



(Lucas et al., 2010).

Speaking English after learning the language is a key motivator for language learners for interacting and communicating with one another (Lucas et al., 2010). The Saudi Arabian culture is a great inhibitor of using English language freely, as traditionally there has been a stigma associated with losing local values and traditions for westernisation. Thus, with limited opportunities for using English language outside of the classroom environment, secondary school learners in Saudi Arabia rarely have the opportunity to use their English skills outside of their classrooms. Unfortunately, even in the classroom environment, as demonstrated by Alshahrani & Al-Shehri (2012), there is a limited scope for effectively using English language, owing to preconceived and traditional barriers to freedom of expression between students and teachers. Similarly, Kormos and Csizér (2008) study the role of motivation for acquiring English language (L2) among Hungarian students, and demonstrate the impact of culture and environment on the mindset of the student. This is particularly relevant to the Saudi Arabian context as well, because like Hungary, Saudi Arabia also has a rather strong culture, which bears significant influence in the overall way of life, education and work. Saudi Arabian students, like the Hungarian culture, unconsciously inhibits acceptance of English language in social forums, and therefore arises the need for Saudi Arabian people to also accept and allow the absorption of the English language in their territory is reiterated, so that they do not fall behind their fellow countries. Unlike the freshman students in the Philippines, Saudi Arabian students lack adequate intrinsic motivation to use English language; however, if provided tasks such as the dialogue writing journals. There is a tremendous scope for them to improve in their English writing skills, as this will most likely trickle down to their communications in



social media forums, such as WhatsApp, Facebook and LinkedIn. At present, most Saudi Arabian teachers and students alike, communicate in Arabic when it is in writing on social media. Mostly, this is so because of an overall lack in confidence in writing skills and the anxiety associated with making mistakes in a public forum.

Furthermore, in line with the findings of Barr et al., (2008), it is undoubtedly becoming a need for developing the sense of ‘global citizenship’ among future generations, in light of the vastly integrating and merging world. Saudi Arabian students will also need to feel this sense of belonging and responsibility towards domains and people outside of their national boundaries, and in order to inculcate this within these students; it is imperative for local Saudi authorities to make serious evaluations and amendments to the school curriculums. The fact that education and peer interaction play a pivotal role in developing individual identities cannot be overlooked, and, therefore, having an updated and upgraded curriculum that encompasses not only teaching methodologies and subject matter in the sought-after English language, but also one that strives to build the phenomenon of ‘global citizenship’ among Saudi Arabian students, that envisions them to see themselves as part of a larger, global community that is more accepting of other cultures, norms and values. This is vital for enabling acceptance of English language in Saudi Arabian context, and to build a future generation of fluent and proficient English users in Saudi Arabia.

The current curriculum implemented and in use in Saudi Arabian schools is predominantly a teacher-oriented one, where the focus lies mainly on the teacher and less on the student. While teaching is done to make the students learn prescribed subject



matter, the teacher remains to be the focus of the classroom. With increasing awareness among teachers for increasing their students' motivation in learning English language, there is definitely a change in the general mindset of both students and teachers, however, the general expectations of maintaining formal communication methods can be a hindrance for freedom of expression in students. Similarly, teachers are not aware of the effect their class ambience and atmosphere may have on the learning of students. Typically, the setting is teacher and lecture oriented in the classrooms, emphasising the cultural and traditional value of making the teacher a superior subject to the student. This, although not intentional on part of the teacher, does make it more challenging for students to embrace speaking or asking questions in English. In addition to this, the local curriculum stresses on learning from textbooks, most of which are written in Arabic language. Incorporating valuable tools such as dialogue writing journals into the curriculum can further strengthen efforts to make acquisition of English language among students in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabian students are also victims of a strongly prevailing culture based on respect for teachers and elders, that carries forward in communications within the classrooms as well as communications outside the classroom environment, with family and friends. By encouraging students to maintain reflective journals in English, Saudi Arabian students can take advantage of a medium that is personally effective for enhancing their writing skills, where they will be able to express their thoughts and ideas freely without fear of disrespecting their teacher or elders. Not only will they gain confidence in their writing skills and their overall personal development will also benefit, but by using peer evaluation as a technique to check their work will further involve them in the tasks. This technique has not yet been made an active part of the Saudi Arabian schooling system, as peer evaluation is not a widely acceptable form of



assessment. However, with the evolving education system, incorporating elements such as these can play a positive role in increasing the use of English language between students.

Moreover, there is little to no use of technology or games in the Saudi Arabian school and college classrooms. As Al-Jarf (2002) determined, there was substantial difference in language acquisition between students who used computers to facilitate English learning and those who did not. There is very little, if any, role of computer-based learning in schools in Saudi Arabia. The implication to include computers in learning activities for English seem stronger than ever before, which would allow students the opportunity to not only use their English skills more, but also word-press their work through accessible software and programs for spell and grammar check. Similarly, the Saudi Arabian schools lack inclusion of games and technologies in their teaching, and by including ubiquitous games in classroom activities, students interest in acquiring English language can be enhanced, leading to more attainment of learning outcomes, as demonstrated by Liu & Chu (2010) in their study.

As mentioned previously, access to the Internet and video gaming sites is also restricted in the country, through various government laws and regulations, despite substantial advancements in the Information Technology field in Saudi Arabia. Local, young individuals are therefore restricted to relying on verbal communications in person or via the telephone. This further restricts English speaking, writing and listening opportunities among young learners to only the classroom environment. By providing Saudi Arabian students access to computer and Internet from the early stages of education, future Saudi



Arabian students can benefit from computer-based learning methodologies and be exposed to English language through online material and programs that require communications and/or commands in English only. This will enable them to grow with a greater acceptance of English and the western world, allowing them to reach a more successful, and globalised vision towards the future world culture. By nurturing acceptance of the Western culture and way of life, while also instilling in young learners local cultural and religious values, the future Saudi Arabian generations can emerge as valuable participants of a rapidly globalising and increasingly challenging world.

Conclusions, limitations and implication

This paper establishes a positive correlation between intrinsic motivation and acquisition of English language in Saudi Arabian school learners. Having been a secondary school teacher in Saudi Arabia for several years, I witness an emerging willingness and desire among young Saudi Arabian learners to speak and use the English language. However, this interest is not being nurtured or developed in the existing learning environment owing to traditional beliefs and methods of classroom activities and teaching. The government's ongoing scheme for sending Saudi Arabian graduates to foreign countries for higher study is further motivating students to acquire English language skills. However, I have seen among returning colleagues and fellow teachers that they quickly revert to Arabic in their teaching and communication upon arriving back in Saudi Arabia after completing their study abroad. Moreover, my interaction with other Saudi Arabian students studying in Australia also shows me that these students continue to use Arabic script in their social medial communications here, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Viber



and Tango. Their laptops are set to the Arabic mode, where MS Word assignments and essays are written right to left, which is the direction Arabic script, is written, rather than the English method of writing from left to right.

This demonstrates the reluctance among Saudi Arabian students to let go of their traditional methods of working and changing into the English way of writing. This is further verified by feedback from my fellow teachers back in Saudi Arabia, who are trying to incorporate typed computer assignments to their students. They find their students also submitting assignments that have been typed in English but using the Arabic style of writing and formats. By inculcating the global citizenship aspect in Saudi Arabian learners from a young age will, in my opinion, facilitate the Saudi Arabian people to be more open to change and to embrace the western ways of doing things, rather than being resistant to change.

My colleagues in my secondary school in Saudi Arabia also share experiences of their classrooms, and reveal that although students are more eager to learn English; their enthusiasm is short-lived as classroom activities are not conducive to English language, with most of the teaching material being in Arabic, and the expectation to answer questions in Arabic rather than English. While one teacher explained to me that she tried to lighten the atmosphere in her classroom by acting more friendly with her students, and felt her students respond playfully in return, this method of teaching did not sit well with the other teachers in the school. Culturally, they felt the semblance of respect for adults must be enforced in teaching, and therefore my friend had to, eventually, return to the conventional, formal style of teaching in her classroom.



It is anticipated that this research paper will play a key role for local Saudi Arabian authorities and ministries to re-evaluate their curriculum and policies to make a positive impact on learners' motivation for acquiring the English language, and their ability and skills to use it socially, academically, professionally and personally in various modes of communication and interaction with others in the national and global context. The aim of this paper's findings is to pave the way for better policy and action to gear future Saudi Arabian generations to play a more pivotal role in a highly complex and globalised world, and to be able to effectively participate and prevail in increasingly demanding roles of individuals in the future.

A key limitation of this study is that it relies on experiences of foreign, western countries where culture may have played a more positive role; while Saudi Arabian context is very different environment of culture and mindset. To counter this limitation, however, this paper has incorporated the experience and feedback of existing Saudi Arabian teachers in schools and colleges across Saudi Arabia, so that realistic assumptions and inferences can be drawn in light of the findings made from the extensive and valuable literature review.



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